

Spatialising the politics of coexistence: *gui ju* (规矩) in Singapore

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Geographers and other social scientists have developed ways to describe and analyse people's routine and fleeting encounters with others in cities experiencing migrant-led diversification. Much of this work illuminates the significance of everyday rubbing along, but how diversity is lived and negotiated through specific principles of interaction and exchange has so far remained obscure. As such, the politics of fleeting encounters in public spaces have not been explained. Further, the overwhelming majority of conceptualisations of coexistence draw from European and North American contexts. Through an empirically grounded analysis of the principles of social organisation (known as *gui ju* in Singapore), I demonstrate that everyday norms of civility emerge as ways of boundary-breaking and boundary-making in shared spaces in Singapore's Jurong West. Addressing the potentials and limitations of coexisting with difference, I clarify how diversity is managed and negotiated in the everyday vis-à-vis uneven interconnections between people of different backgrounds. I discuss the prosaic and situated ways in which positive and strained relations can occur simultaneously and situate these in a wider structural context. I argue that the geography of coexistence is constituted through socio-spatial processes where the politics of living with diversity are mediated through, although not limited to, fleeting encounters. *Gui ju* clarifies the messiness inherent in shared spaces and, effectively, filter and curtail diversity by perpetuating the normativities of acceptable behaviour in public.

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Introduction

Diversity doesn't get any wider than in Singapore. Being a multi-racial society, Singapore is home to a collage of communities, cultures and religions, each accompanied by a rich heritage that dates far back. Beyond just co-existing with one another, there is also mutual respect and this can be seen in daily interactions and festive celebrations. (YourSingapore campaign 2013¹)

Geographers and other social scientists are developing myriad ways to describe people's growing encounters within urban diversity. Much of this interest builds on earlier work that highlights how migrants are key agents in shaping urban diversity (Datta 2011; Glick-Schiller *et al.* 1992; Ley 1994; McDowell *et al.* 2008). The opening quote situates diversity in Singapore by outlining the contours of what it means to coexist with people of different backgrounds. Singapore's diversity, and its welcoming of newcomers, are regarded as enriching assets in the city-state that prides itself on being historically multicultural. As indicated by the source of this quote, Singapore is also a particularly distinctive case study of urban diversity and encounters, given the state's rigorous teaching of coexistence.

Recent online forums, however, reflect a different reality with people quick to post photos of foreigners transgressing rules in public spaces. These are not limited to low-waged migrants, who have formed the majority of newcomers to Singapore in recent years. Former British wealth manager, Anton Casey, enraged Singaporeans with his Facebook postings showing him calling public transport commuters 'poor people' and having to 'wash the stench of public transport off him' (*The Straits Times* 2014). Tensions may simmer, but most people do not clash with one another in everyday city life, regardless of backgrounds. The majority of people's movements and encounters through the public realm are simply uneventful. It is so because humans have learnt to regulate their actions in certain patterns (Lofland 1998). Public spaces become contact zones where people have to encounter difference. Encounters in shared spaces such as schools, markets and bus stations are embedded with banal yet highly nuanced principles of coexisting, with individuals having to negotiate dense spaces with strangers of different backgrounds. In dense settings where diversity is lived in a far more mundane way, public space becomes the site of possibilities and limitations where these patterns

are reproduced. As Amin (2012) argues, there are various sorts of politics of living with the stranger that are situated within specific conditions. There are 'moments, situations and modes of encounter where people learn prosaic methods of accommodation' (Wise and Velayutham 2013, 39).

How do these everyday spatial encounters in public shape the geography of coexisting with diversity? Entrenched within these practices of living with difference are principles of public organisation, where multiplicities of urban flow are managed and oriented (Amin 2012; Lancione 2011). Through this non-Western case study, I argue that an empirical analysis of micro-encounters in Singapore contributes to the spatial conceptualisation of urban coexistence under conditions of migrant-led diversification. I address this issue by demonstrating that *gui ju* is a key social organising principle that prescribes proper codes of conduct in Singapore's public spaces. I argue that the politics of coexistence in Singapore's shared spaces is based on adherence to normative forms of behaviour. I examine the key tenets of *gui ju* as it is shaped by state-led campaigns and employed on the ground through approved forms of socialisation and civility. Public space and diversity are produced and experienced through processes of negotiation, tensions, inclusions, exclusions and socialities in various ways. Through the story of Jurong West, I argue that the thread holding these together is a set of social organising principles, legitimate codes of conduct prevalent within the space. These principles, or *gui ju* as referred to in Singapore, become the overarching guiding code to manage diversity in these spaces.

Urban diversity and encounters

Much of the recent work on urban diversity has paid great attention to Western European contexts such as the United Kingdom (Amin 2012; Valentine 2008; Valentine and Waite 2012; Wilson 2011) and 'immigrant' countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Hiebert 2002; Pearson 2001). Terms such as 'multiculturalism', 'social cohesion' and, indeed, 'diversity' have become part of both political and academic discourse in describing social relations and often prescribing *how they ought to be* in contexts peopled by individuals from different backgrounds. Valentine has argued strongly that everyday encounters are often only indicators of socially accepted forms of public civility, and 'urban etiquette does not equate with an ethics of care and mutual respect for difference' (2008, 329). Nor do transient encounters, even of a positive nature, necessarily 'scale up', that is, develop any lasting challenge to embedded prejudices and stereotypes (see also Clayton 2009). The uncertainty about what can be delivered by focusing on encounter has

been examined by Askins and Pain (2011) in their work with a mixed group of youth in a community arts project in the north-east of England. Wilson (2011) has also explored the social relations of mixed populations using public transport in the English city of Birmingham. What the research of Askins and Pain (2011) and Wilson (2011) highlights is, first, the unstable nature of an encounter and, second, the importance of materiality in shaping its tone. For instance, Askins and Pain argue that the tactility of the actual art materials invited interactions and mixing, 'contact with and through objects ... mediated points of connection and similarity, opening up potential for new social relations to be enacted' (2011, 817). Wilson also suggests that the intimacies that travelling by public transport demands of heterogeneous populations – bodies closely sharing confined spaces – demands sets of practices and obligations that can produce sometimes conflictual, but also sometimes consensual social relations and even a sense of being part of a 'collective culture' and 'temporary community' (2011, 646). This approach to diversity offers a distinctive way of addressing contemporary public spaces and the transformations that shape them. Overwhelmingly, however, existing research rarely discusses the structural context in which these encounters occur. Furthermore, while much of this work has been helpful in illuminating the significance of everyday rubbing along, it remains unclear what the mechanisms or principles are that enable people to negotiate and mediate through encounters with diverse others.

In this paper, I resist drawing on European and North American models of 'assimilation', 'integration' and 'multiculturalism' by delineating configurations of diversity in Singapore, as led by labour migrants. Indeed, diversification processes in Asia are different largely because of the region's distinct post-colonial geographies, histories of migration and economic development strategies (Yeoh and Lin 2013). Much of the existing work highlighted above has been helpful in drawing our attention to the complex micro interactions that frequently happen in various public spaces. Don Mitchell (2014) reminds us, however, that it remains critically important to clarify and explain through the complexity in our analyses. The objective of this paper is thus an attempt to explain the principles of coexistence and interactions with diversity. Through an empirically grounded analysis, I demonstrate that everyday norms of civility emerge as ways of boundary-breaking and boundary-making in shared spaces. I do not romanticise micro-encounters as simple solutions to larger structural issues of inequality and marginalisation that various groups experience. Rather, I address the potentials and limitations of coexisting with difference. In pointing these out, I clarify how diversity is managed and negotiated in the everyday vis-

à-vis uneven interconnections among people of different backgrounds. I discuss the prosaic, situated ways in which positive and strained relations can occur simultaneously in everyday spaces and situate these in a wider structural context. I argue that the geography of coexistence is constituted through socio-spatial processes where the politics of living with diversity are mediated, in part, through fleeting encounters. *Gui ju* clarifies the messiness inherent in public spaces, to filter, curtail and simplify diversity. Rather than a narrowly focused set of rules, *gui ju* is better understood as a set of broad, overarching principles that guide everyday encounters in public through practices of inclusion and exclusion.

Managing a historically multi-ethnic state through the everyday organisation of difference

Singapore's diversity was present during pre-colonial times, when it was already a bustling trade emporium (Chew and Lee 1991). Following independence in 1965, the governing body faced the challenge of imagining a common objective as a nucleus of nationhood for the city-state. Socially and politically, building a nation-state out of an ethnically diverse population with a complex background of economic, political, social and cultural differences has resulted in the People's Action Party's attempt to produce an overarching national identity and an ideology of 'multiracialism' (Lai 1995, 17). This measure officially gives separate but equal status to the Chinese, Malays, Indians and 'Others'² (or CMIO, for short) and informs official policies on various issues related to the economy, language, culture, religion and community life (Lai 1995; Perry *et al.* 1997). This framework of race became part of the national imagination such that Singaporeans of various backgrounds could imagine themselves as a multi-racial people. English was adopted as a convenient language of trade and is the first language of the country, tying the different ethnic groups together.

The insecurity of Singapore's regional geopolitics was, and often continues to be, an active dimension affecting ethnic relations and management in the city-state. Situated in the Malay Archipelago that has a large 'indigenous' Malay population and an 'immigrant' Chinese minority, Singapore's ethnic composition created an arguably disadvantageous fit to its surrounding region. It was because of its ethnic differentiation and dominance of its Chinese people that many viewed Singapore as a Chinese place, or even state (Lai 1995). To some extent, the ethnic identities of the Chinese and Malays in Singapore are shaped by the comparison of their economic and political positions with those of the Chinese and Malays in Malaysia. The position of Chinese in Singapore is further structured by the

historical experiences of the Chinese immigrant minorities in South-East Asia (Tan 2004); conversely, however, some viewed the Malays' social position in Singapore as a disadvantaged indigenous minority (Lai 1995). Finally, the ethnically differentiated development during the colonial period has resulted in limited interaction, the maintenance of rigid ethnic boundaries, strong stereotyping and an underlying sense of insecurity and fear of dominance by Chinese and Malays of each other. These fears culminated in three violent riots prior to Singapore's independence (Lai 1995).

The construction of the local multiracial community must be understood against this background. Until the 1960s, Singapore's population mostly lived in separate ethnic settlements established by the colonial administration. Large-scale resettlement into self-contained public housing estates, implemented through the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was one of the ways in which the ideology of multiracialism materialised spatially. Through the construction of publicly administered, largely ownership-based, housing projects, the HDB has been able to provide Singaporeans with affordable shelter and spaces to facilitate interaction among different ethnicities (Goh 2005). These include neighbourhood schools, markets, community centres, playgrounds, void decks and walkways that link one block of flats to another (Chua 1995; Lai 1995; Perry *et al.* 1997). Ethnic quotas were enforced to ensure each housing block reflects Singapore's ethnic composition. The state's socio-spatial engineering of diversity in HDB estates precluded ethnic segregation. People are not just thrown into contact, but through state practice forced into contact. From a strategic level, then, public housing in Singapore is a powerful tool in managing ethnic diversity and relations. The state also manages ethnic relations via the school curriculum, where the ethnicity of the student determines his or her 'mother tongue' – for example, a Malay student must study Malay, an Indian student must study Tamil. Ethnic identity also continues to be clearly denoted on every Singaporean's identity card. The notion of multiracialism, hence, is conveyed and experienced as commonplace in the everyday living spaces of Singaporeans. To a large extent then, it is the success of multiracialism that prompts the emergence of conduct and behaviour rather than race as a social organising principle in shared spaces.

State-led diversification

Economic restructuring measures since the early 1970s illustrate configurations of state, capital, labour and commodity production within a changing international division of labour of which Singapore has always been

keen to be a part. While I argue that these measures are by no means limited to practices of the state and are instead conditioned by the dynamics of global restructuring, the Singaporean state has particularly strong control over its strategies of development through its purposeful-shaped processes of diversification (Olds and Yeung 2004). The integrated development processes of export-orientation and foreign investment-driven developmental strategies perceived to attract desirable 'global capital' requires the import of human capital, both high- and low-waged labour.

While other transnational sojourners, such as marriage and student migrants, are also contributing to growing social diversity, the sharp increase in immigration to Singapore in the past two decades has been propelled by the urgent economic need to fortify Singapore's labour force. The turn of the century saw an increasing share of non-citizen population – a direct consequence of the city-state's restructuring policies to attract and rely on foreign labour (Yeoh 2004). The deliberate and strategic reliance on 'foreign manpower' is part and parcel of the dominant neoliberal discourse of globalisation as an 'inevitable and virtuous growth dynamic' (Coe and Kelly 2002, 348).

Today, foreigners make up 33 per cent of the total workforce in Singapore.³ As elsewhere, the transmigrant population grows in tandem with restructuring processes to render labour more 'flexible' in relation to capital (Yeoh 2004). The workforce was strategically and rigorously configured to incorporate a significantly large foreign labour pool, which can be broadly divided into two strands: foreign talent and foreign workers. Both strands of workers are brought into Singaporean space strategically and they are administered very differently (Yeoh 2006). Foreigners' access to rights and privileges is mainly differentiated by skills status and by the perceived desirability of these skills to the achievement of national goals. Differentiated access is institutionalised by the issuance of a range of work passes and permits that fall broadly into the employment pass and the work permit categories (Yeoh 2004). Building a nation in the image of a 'cosmopolis' requires selective inclusionary projects to entice 'foreign talent' – highly skilled professional workers, entrepreneurs and investors who are part of the face of cosmopolitanism in Singapore (Yeoh 2004). This group of migrants holds a form of the employment pass⁴ that enables them to apply for dependents' passes and gives them access to greater job mobility. Far greater in number, however, are the work permit holders, most of whom are concentrated in the manufacturing, construction, ship-building and domestic industries. This pool is also broken down further by nationalities, with rules and regulations set by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), permitting only certain nationalities to access work in particular industries (Ye 2013a).

The bulk of the increase in foreigners comes from the increase in temporary migrant labour in the city-state holding work permits (Ye 2013a,b). Of this group that hold work permits, the largest percentage of increase comes from foreign construction workers, many of whom are from Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (*The Straits Times* 2012). A large number of workers from the Philippines also take on work in low-paying service sector work outside of domestic work. These social divisions manifest tangibly in the segregated landscapes inhabited by temporary migrant workers compared with other populations in Singapore. Shipyard and construction jobs entailing shift-work mean that Bangladeshi male migrants may work in the day or at night, and they generally work on sites away from interactions with the public. Within the migration literature, much has been written on the ways in which local people discriminate against male and female low-waged migrant workers in Singapore. There is also a high degree of spatial constraint in the daily lives of the Bangladeshi workers as the everyday lives of migrant workers are highly reliant on their employers. Institutionalised within the MOM's guidelines for employers who hire foreign workers is the policy that mandates low-waged male migrant workers in Singapore be housed in state-approved, employer provided accommodation. These come in the form of purpose-built dormitories that are commercially run, industrial and/or warehouse premises that have been partly converted to house workers, temporary quarters on work-sites, harbourcrafts (such as ships and marine vessels) and to a smaller extent, HDB flats (MOM website⁵). The majority of such accommodation is segregated from residential areas where local people live.

Familiarising Jurong West

My argument in this paper seeks to demonstrate how everyday encounters in public reproduce spatialised principles of coexisting with diversity. In this section I situate my discussion around data that unpack the multi-layered and changing socio-spatiality of the neighbourhood of Jurong West. The data presented in this paper are drawn from a fieldwork period of 14 months, collected and analysed through mixed methods. Aside from participant-observation and taking fieldnotes in public spaces, I also conducted repeated semi-structured interviews, photo and film elicitation based on images and filmed footage by and with respondents who live and/or work in Jurong West. These respondents were chosen to reflect the demography of the neighbourhood and so were made up of both locals and migrants, of various ethnicities and ages. One of the more interesting dimensions of *gui ju* lies in my recording of field data. Having spent so many

months conducting participant-observation and having conversations with different people in the neighbourhood, it is most often the transgressions and breaches of *gui ju* that are recorded or talked about. As Lofland (1998) pointed out, it appears that people, myself included, typically assume normality. Methodologically, it was through the interrogation of normality and what is considered 'business as usual' in public that my analyses of *gui ju* came about.

Located at the western end of the island, Jurong West may not immediately come to mind as a known site of living with diversity in Singapore. Yet, it was chosen precisely because it is not unlike many neighbourhoods in Singapore but is distinct in its migrant geographies. Typical of the rest of the country, its composition of old diversity is representative of the CMIO model, yet with a far larger number of newcomers than in most other areas of the city-state. The initial post-independence development in the 1960s in Jurong West was heavily industrial. It was designated for such use given its relative distance to the city centre, proximity to the western offshore islands where oil-refining and chemical processing take place as well as the port of Singapore, which remains a significant trade hub in the region and globe. The development of the neighbourhood as a place of residence began when workers were relocated to Jurong West to live in HDB flats. The population living and working in Jurong more recently has come to include new migrants, reflecting the increase in Singapore's foreign workforce. These are predominantly low-waged migrant workers who are housed here in purpose-built dormitories, some of which are more remotely located than others, as mentioned above. This separation of housing for a large percentage of the low-waged migrant population from longer-term residents further demonstrates the spatial demarcations between the local born as well.

With the extension of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) East-West line in 1990, and additions of MRT stations further west, Jurong West and its surrounding areas began to be seen as more desirable places to live. These new rail connections meant that it was also now easier and quicker to get into the city centre. The extension and renovation of Jurong Point shopping centre and the building of a large condominium development immediately above the mall also established the area as a key transport and residential hub. Condominiums such as Parc Vista and The Centris were built to cater to this recent demand for middle-class housing in the area. With limited access to HDB housing, many Permanent Residents and foreigners on Employment Passes live in these private developments. Such transformations also facilitated movement from the neighbourhood as many residents commute to the city for work. There is mobility within

the neighbourhood as well, with well-connected footpaths and shuttle buses.

One implication of this is that public transit and its hubs such as MRT stations and bus interchanges, especially at certain times of the day and week, become extremely tight and crowded spaces of bodily negotiation and movement. The sheer density of bodies in such public spaces is also an important aspect of understanding how everyday diversity is negotiated. It is these visceral and sensorial elements of encounter that generate affective reactions that often shape the ways in which different Others are perceived. This is evidenced by social media and popular discussions around multicultural living that often emerge from concerns over the everyday visual and embodied – indeed, *lived* – aspects of difference. Occasionally these daily negotiations of living with difference bubble over into much more high-profile expressions of anger, such as the Anton Casey example mentioned above. Much more frequently, however, people in public spaces are guided by the principles of managing difference. This does not mean that race is unnoticed in Jurong West, but that differences in race, ethnicity, nationality or gender are highlighted when normative rules are not adhered to in public space. Conversely then, *gui ju* is also subtly exclusionary in that people, including new arrivals, are expected to behave in particular ways. Recognising the presence of social organising principles in any public space thus reveals the salience of exclusion.

Accommodating new migrants

Alongside the consistent rhetoric of 'multiculturalism' and more recently, 'cosmopolitanism' in Singapore, these newer waves of migration into Singapore have incited new social tensions and discrimination, expressed most prominently online (Ye and Kelly 2011; Yeoh and Lin 2013). The Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony – put together by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg, the national body for racial harmony – showed that Singaporeans are not comfortable with having new immigrants making up the majority of people in the country – only about 50 per cent of respondents are comfortable with that idea, with most preferring the status-quo when it comes to Singapore's current racial mix (Channel News Asia 2013⁶). In response, the government has set up various organisations to address and mediate these tensions such as the National Integration Council, and various grassroots organisations such as People's Association and Onepeople.sg. Campaigns that seek to teach coexistence are also common, such as the 'Love Thy Neighbour' campaign to 'promote good neighbourliness' among residents (Jurong Town Council website⁷). Prominent as well are official discourses on the need to integrate, such as:

Even as we maintain an open environment in Singapore, foreigners working here must understand that they too bear a responsibility to the local community, and should respect Singaporean values and norms. This also applies to the group of foreign workers who are here to provide us a service, such as those in construction and estate maintenance. They too have to abide by our social norms and values. At the same time, we should treat them with respect, and appreciate the work they do and the services that they provide for us. (Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore⁸ 2013)

These state efforts to manage relations and interactions between new diversities and long-time residents are interpreted and manifested in everyday ways. Indeed, where multiplicity is the defining urban norm and where co-presence is the common ground (Amin 2012), I have found that people put into practice ways of clarifying the messiness in everyday forms of coexistence. My data indicate that people have developed highly localised tools with which to sort through this multiplicity vis-à-vis co-presence.

Everyday encounters of coexisting with diversity

While there are state-led socio-spatial measures to manage these newer waves of diversity in Singapore such as housing and job allocation and the attempt to manage tensions between the new and old waves of diversity, there are sites that remain and emerge as places of contact. Indeed, the realities of such official visions of diversification cannot only be seen as segregated from everyday urban life but are, crucially, situated in and transforming the social fabric of mundane encounters. Public spaces remain sites where both long-time residents of multicultural make up must coexist and interact with newcomers in highly prosaic and constantly evolving ways.

Yeoh and Huang (1998) draw attention to the way Filipina domestic workers use public spaces, such as Orchard Road's Lucky Plaza, during their rest days. The temporary but regular appropriation of these spaces by female domestic workers as well as the ways in which they are accommodated reflect, reinforce and sometimes circumvent larger unequal power relations at these public spaces temporarily. Similarly, Bangladeshi male migrants also assert their presence within different public spaces in the Singaporean landscape in complex and contentious ways (Ye 2013). By appropriating spaces that are overlooked by other urban residents as socialising spaces, these migrants are circumventing official policy, marking their presence in the city (Collins 2012). In other words, while their use of such spaces is largely a result of exclusion from other places, such as within shopping malls, their act of appropriation reconfigures the dynamics of specific

urban spaces. There remains great precarity in the lives of low-waged migrants where strong and sometimes abusive relations of power occur in everyday life and reflect inter-group attitudes and practices. Thus, while these instances of appropriation do not directly or permanently challenge broader inequalities, such practices of claiming space are important precisely because they allude to the different spatial registers of coexisting with difference in the city. There are spaces, for example, where Bangladeshi male migrants congregate that suggest a co-presence with other urban residents without neglecting the broader power inequalities that condition their use of space. Where this happens, however, is scarcely the sort of harmonious getting along that Anderson (2011) describes in *The cosmopolitan canopy*. There are constant tensions, struggles and disquiet over how things *ought to be* in such spaces. Via such challenges, people engage and negotiate through various cultural norms. In this sort of rubbing along of people of different backgrounds in public spaces then, what are the forms of social organisation that people employ to manage encounters with difference in public? How do people sort through who belongs and who does not in the context of growing diversity in a country that has always been diverse? Diversity in practice in such sites holds profound challenges and possibilities to the project of living with difference. There are multiple modes of negotiating, including and excluding diversity that become patterns of socially organising difference in everyday life. These can, in effect, produce ways of discriminating as well as accommodating difference.

Gui ju

To the extent that the encounter is always mediated (Amin 2012), the geography of *gui ju* is conceptualised as one such mode of socio-spatial organisation in diverse, shared spaces. It is a localised code of conduct that mediates and governs these encounters in different public spaces in fleeting and more sustained encounters. This is a term that was repeatedly used by Chinese-Singaporean respondents in my work. Within socio-spatial patterns of coexistence, *gui ju* is a normative, social classificatory set of values that forms local notions of civility, where locals know how to behave in public, whereas migrants do not. Yet, crucial to this form of civility is the element of restraint, which negotiates encounters with difference where people hold themselves back from direct confrontations. *Gui ju* therefore prevents this tension from bubbling over into more violent conflict and becomes a mundane way in which urban diversity is encountered and governed in the everyday. It is also a prevalent form of power through the mundane way in which urban diversity is encountered and governed in

the everyday. The violation of *gui ju* by people, which in rapidly diversifying cities like Singapore also include new arrivals, exposes dominant orderings in space, who knows how to behave and who does not, who belongs and who does not.

The theoretical impetus for focusing on *gui ju* is largely two-fold. The first is to critically consider the ways in which studies on diversity in a non-Western setting – in this case, Singapore – can actively contribute to our conceptual understandings of public space and urban diversity rather than simply supporting existing conceptualisations. Relatedly, the second and larger impetus is a response to much of the recent writings on urban diversity that celebrate possibilities of coexistence without clarifying the ways in which people organise their diverse social worlds that are embedded with different social cues and codes. Missing from the growing literature on the geographies of encounter is how the micropolitics of everyday coexistence is organised through the intertwined processes of judgement and continuous re-enactment of appropriate conduct. Through examining the everyday practice of *gui ju*, I show how people can organise and reproduce their social encounters in diverse public spaces in Singapore's Jurong West neighbourhood in inclusive and exclusive ways. *Gui ju* is a socio-spatial construct that demonstrates how people at once develop the capacity to live with difference by managing the antagonisms inherent in such socialities through normative codes of conduct. *Gui ju* also creates boundaries between those who adhere to the codes and those who do not. This is most clearly seen in the interactions between new migrants and locals. Locally appropriate codes of conduct for everyday interactions are striking in how they may generate and reproduce the conditions essential for coexistence. Specifically, it is the act of holding back prevalent in *gui ju* that I argue creates a distinct form of inclusion in mediating difference. The analysis of *gui ju* also shows a darker side of civility in public space, where manners and formalities of face-to-face interactions in everyday life is also about co-optation and reinforcing the divide between migrants and locals by disciplining how people ought to behave.

State-led elements of gui ju in Singapore

The state plays an active and recurrent role in the shaping of living with difference in the densely populated city state that conceptualises what *gui ju* is in ways that precede current forms of migrant-led diversification. This is an important point to note because it highlights the historical geography of diversity rather than assuming diversification to be entirely new. There have been a multitude of state-led campaigns and rules that attempt to order how public spaces should be used. Signs installed at MRT stations and on public buses state that eating, drinking, smoking and durians are not

allowed. There are also highly visible signs prohibiting sleeping or 'loitering' in the void decks of HDB flats, even though these spaces at the ground levels of public housing are part of the 'community bonding aspect of the [HDB's] mission' (*The Straits Times* 1999, cited in Goh 2005). There are also fines imposed on people who do not conform to these rules. Such measures, especially within the ubiquitous openness of spaces such as the void deck – anyone can, in theory, walk through them, regardless of whether they are residents or not – are intended to foster surveillance and management of use, guarding against disapproved forms of behaviour such as littering (see Figure 1), vandalism and certain ways of spending time in public (Ooi and Tan 1992). More recently, there has been the 'National Tray Return' campaign organised by the National Environment Agency and the Singapore Kindness Movement to encourage people to return their trays after their meals at food centres (Asia One News 2012⁹).

Aside from these measures of shaping behaviour in public, the narrative of *gui ju* has more recently come to include attitudes towards newcomers where Singaporeans are exhorted to be open and welcoming of them.

It is ultimately up to us how big-hearted how we want to be. We may be a small island, we cannot be small-minded. We cannot just be a prosperous and successful country. We have also got to be a caring, a generous, a decent people; people who are gracious and warm towards one another as well as towards others and that is the best way to ensure that tomorrow Singapore will have a bigger heart. There is one particularly difficult area where we need to be big hearted and that is in relations between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans. Singaporeans must show a generosity of spirit to one another, including new arrivals . . . New arrivals must also embrace our values, commit themselves to Singapore and integrate into our community. (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, National Day Rally 2012)

Jurong West as a diverse neighbourhood

Against the backdrop of the state's involvement in shaping the form of diversity in Singapore at the



Figure 1 Anti-littering campaign advertisements next to a block of flats

national level, there are also more localised measures of ‘civil-ising’ how strangers should live in close proximity in public spaces. The following is an excerpt from a ‘Love Your Neighbour’ campaign that was launched in May 2013:

The main objective of this campaign is to get neighbours to know, support and care for each other. When neighbours care and respect each other, they will on their own refrain from negative acts such as littering, failing to clean after their pets, cluttering the corridor or making too much noise as they know that such acts will cause inconvenience and harm their neighbours. I find that trying to resolve disputes after they had occurred is so much harder compared to preventing their occurrence. Installing more and more cameras and other safeguards are also not the solutions as we are still not addressing the key factors that contributed to such negative behaviours and that is a lack of care for your neighbours. I hope that, over time, what started off as a campaign will become internalised and are adopted as a core value among Singaporeans. (Halimah Yaacob, Member of Parliament for Jurong Grassroots Council, Jurong Town Council website¹⁰)

Gui ju as discursive practice is prevalent in negotiations of a civil code of conduct in Jurong West. While it is in Chinese, the sensibilities of *gui ju* are also internalised by other ethnic groups, as demonstrated by several of my respondents, some of whom are quoted in this paper. To my respondents, practising *gui ju* means that one is behaving in the socially sanctioned way. Thus, the discursive practice of *gui ju* is a significant way of mediating encounters among strangers in public and given the recent changes to Singapore and especially in Jurong West, is extended to encounters between migrants and locals. It is seen as a localised social norm that new migrants have not adopted, a sort of knowing that locals have but migrants do not.

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore demonstrates that the majority of Singaporeans feel ‘uncomfortable’ with the growing pool of new migrants in the city-state (Channel News Asia 2013⁶). Indeed, an article in *The Straits Times* reported that ‘Most Singaporeans may agree that foreign workers are needed, but are uncomfortable with living alongside them’ (*The Straits Times* 2013). Two respondents I interviewed reflect on coexisting with diversity in the following quotes:

Maybe people accept it because that’s how they have to live. (Sarah*, Chinese-Singaporean woman in her thirties, talking about working in Jurong West, the densest neighbourhood in Singapore whose growth is migrant-led)

I do feel a bit disoriented. I choose not to engage with them sometimes because I don’t know if I am offending them ... I can’t tell if someone is from Burma or Vietnam or Malaysia or Singapore – what if I do or say something rude!

So I just do what I need to do and then go. (Joanne, Chinese-Singaporean woman who works in Jurong West)

Embedded within this disorientation lies a level of sociability that is a result of ‘thrown togetherness’ within a context of migrant-led diversity (Massey 2005). Although enacted through avoidance, Sarah expresses that it is more about not offending the newcomers as she has to negotiate a variety of social codes, rather than simply avoiding them because she dislikes them. Indeed, it is the act of restraint prevalent in *gui ju* that I argue is powerful in mediating difference, rather than the physical and discursive acts that are carried out. Scholars of everyday encounters in public spaces have discussed the potential for ‘difference’ to be overcome through the processes of regular mixing and physical proximity to people of various backgrounds such as in cafes, buses, parks and markets (Amin 2002; Laurier and Philo 2006; Noble 2005; Wilson 2011). Notably, these studies of coexistence highlight the importance of the everyday indifferences to difference in shared spaces where gestures and words are said, expressed or carried out to accomplish momentary convivialities and cooperations among strangers. It has also been critiqued that many of these acts of banal everyday encounters of civilities and convivialities are fleeting, hence need not be scaled up to over a longer period of time (Valentine and Waite 2012). Lofland reminds us, however, how this precisely illuminates the uncertainty, the excitement and perhaps the risk of the urban environment (Lofland 1998). That Joanne chooses not to engage with others because she is afraid of ‘offending’ suggests the ambiguity of knowing exactly who one is and, thus, of knowing exactly what norms apply. This ambiguity is exacerbated in conditions of rapid diversification such as in Jurong West.

Employing *gui ju* as localised form of civility

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes further demonstrates how the employment of *gui ju* maintains civility in public:

A group of Chinese Singaporean seniors meet daily on a concrete path outside a block of flats to play an old Chinese card game called *sei sek pai*. They set up on a pathway linking nearby residential buildings to a bus stop, Boon Lay Shopping Center and Boon Lay Market. The concrete path is lined with concrete benches and trees that provide shade. The path is nicknamed in Cantonese by various seniors as ‘*lou yun gai*’, which translates literally into English as ‘Seniors Street’. Rather than sitting on any of the permanent concrete benches along the pathway, the card players themselves have set up tables and plastic chairs for their game. Their claiming of this space also comes, in part,

through their furnishing it. Aside from chairs and tables, there is a broom, a large water dispenser and a fly swat. The tree next to this corner has been tied with rope around its circumference where the seniors place spare umbrellas and hang items lost by local residents, such as keys. Dinesh, an Indian Singaporean respondent who isn't a part of this group tells me that 'it's ok because they don't bother other people'. Mr Ng, a regular card player tells me that South Asian male migrants sometimes take a seat in their corner. He says this is usually fine, unless the person is drinking. Then he or someone else from the group will 'nicely tell them to go somewhere else'. He says there is 'no need to shout rudely. Just tell them nicely'.

The above excerpt presents a typical daytime scenario in one public space of the neighbourhood. Similar to Koch and Latham's (2011) observations of the Prince of Wales Junction in West London, this is a small illustration of the forms of sociality and togetherness. Notably, however, this coexistence is facilitated by *gui ju*. As much as there is conviviality through the sharing and, quite literally, fashioning of space here by the card players and other residents, there are also certain principles that underlie the social organisation of diversity here. Behaviour such as drinking at the corner is not tolerated and the sanction is carried out through the practice of civility, which monitors and educates transgressors. The spatiality of social organising principles pervasive in public spaces therefore excludes behaviour that does not adhere to approved behaviours but is reinforced through civility.

Sometimes new people don't understand our *gui ju* – throw litter, sit anywhere they like. But they can be nice people also. Especially Bangladeshis – talk very gently, not like those from China who talk so loud! But (we) don't like sitting next to *yin du ren* (this term in Mandarin for 'Indians' is here used as a catchall phrase for South Asian male migrants) on the MRT trains because they smell bad . . . but cannot tell them directly because that would be very rude. We must also have *gui ju*. (Chinese-Singaporean woman in her 50s)

Crucially, *gui ju* is also an exercise in restraint where it would be considered transgressive to tell someone off directly in public places, even if they may disapprove in private. Hence, even though migrants such as Chinese newcomers are perceived to have no *gui ju* for talking too loudly in public, the knowing local, such as Nurul in the quote below, also refrains from telling them off directly.

People will honour other people's space! Even if it is a migrant space. But only as long as it doesn't hinder the walkway or get in the way. I mean I hate it when like how Malay boys and some skater boys just sit around with their skateboards and holler! These uncles and migrants, I don't care. Maybe the Banglas tend to look at you at one way. Maybe it's just them lah. I used to not like them but now I just forget it and walk away without making eye contact! As long as it doesn't disturb your peace, it is fine. They do their own thing. . . . But I feel like people from China no matter what they do, they will always been stereotyped as rowdy. No

matter what they do! They can be nice, they can have their space, whatever. I mean sometimes we are like 'ohh . . . Bangla (with slight disdain)' but no one will say 'eh don't sit down'. But if it is from China, people tend to be like tsk . . . I think only China people will cause tension. Malays if they are too rowdy and Indians. In general, everyone sticks to their own space and there is no tension or at least conflict. But for China people, there is hatred towards them! When I hear migrants with tension, I think China. In trains, they are very loud ah! Must they really shout into their phones? (Nurul, Malay-Singaporean in her 20s)

Where urban living in diverse public spaces is a palimpsest of identities, traditions, languages and norms, it becomes all the more important for people to develop ways of living in close physical proximity in mutual peace and accommodation. *Not* telling off, *not* directly confronting the person who is deemed to have no *gui ju* is how people deal with difference, even if this difference is offensive or makes one uncomfortable, such as when Bangladeshis stare (in the example above). This, as Lofland (1998) points out, occurs through the exercise of civil inattention which makes co-presence possible. It is not so much out, occurs of psychological distress but rather appears to be a social act of being civil in a situation that is transient ('I just forget it and walk away . . .'). Even if Nurul (above) did not like certain behaviours in private, it is precisely because locals like her have developed a tacit sense of what it means to be civil that they do not confront the tension directly. This non-response or avoidance becomes a form of accommodation of a vast array of identities. *Gui ju* hence facilitates the reproduction of everyday life in diverse public spaces where, as Sarah says in an earlier quote, it is not clear where people are from. *Gui ju* is also surrounded by exceptions and variations. In Nurul's quote, that 'no matter what (Chinese nationals) do, they will always be stereotyped as rowdy' along with Malay boys and skater boys, demonstrates that there are exceptions to *gui ju* that further reinforce the rule. While *gui ju* is a principle that newcomers have yet to learn, it is by no means limited to newcomers: it is intolerant and exclusive of behaviours and people who do not adhere to normative forms of behaviour. This slipperiness of *gui ju* points to the highly nuanced politics of using public space. Aside from being just a positive aspect of unavoidable proximity that is the nature of living in cities, there is also an encroachment in certain respects of what is acceptable. While cultivated civil inattention allows certain transgressions to slip by, certain behaviours also situated local norms more than others, such as talking loudly in public.

This is also seen in the following quote from an interview I conducted with a Chinese-Singaporean woman in her early twenties who runs a sundries shop in Jurong West.

There are really a lot of Indians who live around us now. Our customer base is also made up of workers who live at the dorms in Pioneer. They are nice people lah, like the Bangladeshis. So we carry a lot of different kinds of rice to sell to them. We used to have a lot more Thais but now very few – they are nice also. Especially nicer than the PRCs who are so rude! Really no *gui ju*. You know, they just throw the money down on the counter like that!

Similar to Wilson's (2013) discussion of a primary school in Birmingham, the sundries shop is a space of diversity and tolerance, but one that is also fractured by selective tension and principles of behaviour. The quote suggests that intolerance towards newcomers is neither fixed nor sufficiently anchored in ethnicity. The politics of civility, conceptualised through *gui ju*, therefore emerges through this instability as the guiding principle of sorting through difference, including some while excluding others in public.

The following quote further points to the fragmented ways in which people encounter difference, where some newcomers are more tolerated because of their adherence to social order, whether they consciously know it or not.

When residents complained a few years ago about China workers walking around in their underwear, the workers 'were gracious and changed their habits' when EM Services told them it was not something done here, he said. (*The Straits Times* 2008)

The social organisation tool of *gui ju* becomes a localised form of friction that, in this case, is imposed by locals in the know onto migrants in their midst to organise, regulate and place judgement on diverse others. In other words, the politics of urban diversity is also spatialised in public as revealed through the analysis of *gui ju*.

Sorting through strangeness: *gui ju* at the market

Clearly, exercising civility towards diverse others in public is not necessarily to like them. The following is based on a conversation I had with a key informant, Auntie Wong, at a weekly flea market that takes place in Jurong West every Sunday. The flea market was moved further south on the pathway because of construction on the north side. At this side of the pathway, customers are much fewer. To deal with the reduced flow of people, the stall-holder stays open longer and also started selling electronic items that their neighbour gave them. Ever since moving here, her customers have mostly been residents of the surrounding blocks and the construction workers working on the path's renovations. She says that 'most of the time it's ok'. She mentions, however, that new people 'give her a lot of problems'. They start by saying they want a shirt for \$2 or something for \$1. Bargaining for too low a

price is a transgression at the flea market. Similarly, it is considered uncivil when vendors sell clothes for less than \$1. The vendors I speak with feel that such a move pressures them to sell their items at an even lower price. The phrase 'no choice' comes up a lot in my conversations with Auntie Wong about how she feels towards having migrant vendors and customers. Parts of civility emerge more from being blasé about difference in a place such as the flea market than appreciating it. Place, as Massey (2005) observes, is an arena where negotiation is forced on us. For Auntie Wong and the card players mentioned above, as it probably is for the majority of Singaporeans who have grown used to being in diverse settings, it is the breach of *gui ju* that is worth highlighting rather than when people adhere to *gui ju*. It is this breach that separates the newcomers from older waves of diversity who have internalised what is appropriate bargaining behaviour at the flea market. While the flea market appears to be an informal space of bantering and bargaining across difference, *gui ju* transforms the experience of living with diversity by reinforcing a filter that subtly marginalises different behaviours.

Generating sociality through monitoring *gui ju* in public spaces

Strangers may also use their understanding of the public space's normative system to generate sociability and inclusivity (Lofland 1998). In the following, a respondent explains how she uses this sociability as a channel to inform or educate a newcomer about local cultural practices.

During one of our conversations, Auntie Wong told me that she notices how 'PRCs are not aware of local customs and norms'. She cited an example of when she saw that the PRC vendor near her stall was selling shoes with paper flowers attached that are meant for the dead. She was not sure how to tell the vendor at first, but she eventually did. She said 'Auntie, don't mind my saying this please...'. She told me that the PRC vendor was open to hearing what she had to say, so she went, 'but if you want to sell those shoes, you should remove the paper flowers because in Singapore, those are meant for dead people, not the living!' Auntie Wong said that, 'Auntie from PRC didn't know because in China, their ancestral worship practices are very different'. That Auntie Wong was worried about coming across as rude even when her intentions were good again suggests the mode of civility that runs through such interactions. The PRC woman then very carefully removed the paper flowers from her shoes.

Through the migrant woman's responsiveness towards Auntie Wong's instructions, it appears that this sociability is also met with cooperation. Yet, this

form of inclusivity emerged from the monitoring and subsequent correction of the newcomer's actions. Auntie Wong reached out to the newcomer who, in turn, made the effort to cooperate by removing the paper flowers. In this interaction within the public realm of the flea market, strangers with different cultural backgrounds are working their way through a rather intimidating environment composed of and propelled by inanimate objects. Through both parties' adherence to *gui ju*, the cultural faux pas committed by the newcomer was assuaged in a fairly uneventful way that enables the principle to continue functioning. The boundaries of acceptable behaviour were maintained through principles of civility.

Concluding notes: reproducing difference in public through *gui ju*

Couched throughout the above quotes is also the darker side of *gui ju*. While there appears to be tolerance of difference, there is also a heightened sensitivity to when someone is not adhering to *gui ju*. While expectations of proper behaviour have long been imposed on urban inhabitants, these expectations are increasingly extended to new arrivals. Such is the tight-rope of negotiating diversity and this is also why some groups of people, including migrants, are more tolerated than others. I assert that *gui ju* perpetuates the divide between newcomers and locals where certain groups of migrants are often seen as not having mastered civility in Singapore because they have not learnt or do not practice situated forms of acceptable behaviour in public. This story of coexistence in Jurong West demonstrates how public spaces and diversity are constituted through processes of ongoing conflict and negotiation. It is also clear that exclusion continues to play a key part here. When public behaviour is performed differently during particular times, such as the Chinese migrants speaking loudly, they expose the dominant orderings in space. As Cresswell notes, these are 'right ways of being and doing that define who is in place, who is out of place; who belongs and who does not' (1996, cited in Valentine and Waite 2012, 2060). The spatial politics to *gui ju* are such that practices considered civil such as restraint in public are both productive of such social relations and produced by them. This is also to say that there are boundaries reproduced through *gui ju*. Indeed, Bangladeshis are tolerated by people like Nurul because they 'don't disturb (her) peace' and 'do their own thing', making them more acceptable than Chinese migrants who are 'very loud' and have the ability to 'cause tension'.

Diversity is not unique to Singapore, nor is it limited to the discussion of new migrants. The recent prominence given to coexistence within urban diversity approaches through social practices, quotidian encoun-

ters and convivial mixing in diverse urban environments has brought into focus the ways in which people of different backgrounds routinely navigate cultural difference (Neal and Vincent 2013). Yet, the ways in which diversity is lived and negotiated through specific principles of interactions and exchanges have thus far remained obscure. In comparison with other states in Asia, Singapore is an especially appropriate case study given the explicit structural tutelage of the state on intercultural encounters, which effectively shape norms of civility in public. Recognising the profound ways in which *gui ju* shapes space through its subtle yet pervasive ways imparts analytical purchase to the study of everyday interactions. It is important to situate these organising principles embedded in the everyday through broader structural contours because this allows us to interpret the diversifying nature of public space more broadly. I have demonstrated that *gui ju* is not only filtered through the level of the state, but further is often implicit and finely regulated in tacit ways in urban public spaces. Through the analysis of migrant-led diversification processes in historically multicultural Singapore, we see how multiplicity is managed and sorted through in everyday life. I have illustrated how prosaic forms of coexistence are shaped by localised norms of behaviour in public that are, in turn, shaped by the state's management of diversity. While not limited to fleeting encounters, these cannot be dismissed as cogent moments of people putting into practice the principles of coexistence. Conceptualising these management techniques through the lens of *gui ju*, we see that within this mixing, the negotiation of civility acts as a fine-tuned source of segregation through the disciplining of conducts. It illustrates existing forms of boundary-making in shared spaces as they are internalised and practised in prosaic ways. I hope that this prompts a more critical thinking of the mundane, everyday negotiations we have to make in shared spaces of the city, of the challenges and possibilities of living with diversity and of the politics of coexistence that are already unfolding but that we are still trying to understand.

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Notes

- 1 YourSingapore campaign by the Singapore Tourism Board, <http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/browse/see-and-do/culture-and-heritage.html> Accessed 1 October 2013.
- 2 This is a group comprised of other ethnic minorities in Singapore: Eurasian, Jewish, Armenian, British, etc.
- 3 Our population, our future website, <http://population.sg/resources/workforce-composition/#.UoMrcI3HQnU> Accessed 11 October 2013.
- 4 MOM website, <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-fw/before-you-apply/Pages/overview.aspx> Accessed 1 November 2013.
- 5 Channel News Asia, 'Study confirms discomfort between Singaporeans and new immigrants', <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/study-confirms-discomfort/809784.html> Accessed 11 September 2013.
- 6 Press release: Jurong Town Council Love Your Neighbours Campaign and Launching Ceremony 11 May 2013, <http://www.jrtc.org.sg/component/content/article/41-top-headlines/185-press-release-jurong-town-council-love-your-neighbours-campaign-and-launching-ceremony-11-may-2013-spearheaded-by-speaker-of-parliament> Accessed 12 October 2013.
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